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Spies of the venal variety



Jonathan Pollard

Now Israel has been caught with its hands in the cookie jar, a place where the Soviets have established permanent residence.

Both Jonathan Pollard, for Israel, and Ronald Pelton, for the Soviets, appear to have acted out of pure venality, selling their nation's secrets for cash. It almost makes you nostalgic for Hiss and the Rosenbergs, who were motivated by belief, however mistaken. Julius Rosenberg considered himself a "soldier of Stalin" and, wacky though that is, he went to the chair for it. The motives of Alger Hiss are less discernible, and probably had something to do with the economic crisis and the rise of fascism, but there is no doubt that there was a core of belief and the belief seems to persist to this day.

The espionage of both Pollard and Pelton is beneath contempt, but Pelton is the more despicable of the two. A National Security Agency official, Pelton sold our secrets to the Soviets, and to some degree put the very

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security of the United States at risk. The Soviets are the enemy, and they are potentially lethal to the nation that nurtured Pelton. No punishment could be too harsh.

The spying of Pollard for Israel, also despicable, is not potentially lethal. Israel is not going to attack the United States, and is a close American ally. The Israelis appear to have wanted from him information about the naval capabilities of neighboring Arab countries, after all a legitimate Israeli security concern.

Without for a moment excusing Pollard, I find it difficult to condemn the Israeli action on moral grounds. Of course, they got caught and the whole thing is at least embarrassing to U.S.-Israeli relations. On that account, American friends of Israel have been expressing extreme outrage, perhaps overreacting. The fact of the matter is that we ourselves spy on allies, and indeed we should do it more effectively.

It is obviously in our interest to know the military capabilities and political intentions of every nation in the world, whether NATO ally, Vietnam, or China. Would it not have

been valuable to the Roosevelt administration in 1940 to have had an accurate assessment of the capabilities and likely strategy of the French army? At the very least, we would not have been taken by surprise when the French collapsed in a month that spring.

Just how good are the Chinese fighting forces today? How would they fare against the Soviet army in a localized war on the Siberian border? What is the state of Chinese fighter-pilot training? What are the true, as against the stated, strategic intentions of the leadership in Peking? On such points the balance of power in Asia turns, and with it the balance of power in the world. If some cash changed hands in the interest of more detailed information, it would not imply hostility to China but rather an alert concern for our own and others' interests.

All of our own military attaches abroad are in some degree spies. They pursue military, economic, and political information — even in friendly London. When our naval attaches go swimming, on any shore in the world, they are instructed to examine the beach gradient and the quality of the sand — just in case we have to put troops ashore there. In a world consisting of sovereign and independent nations, there is no guarantee that friends will always remain friends or that enemies will always be enemies. After all, we bombed Japan and invaded Germany within living memory, and we might have to do so again someday under unforeseeable circumstances. Within the NATO alliance itself, no nation shares all of its secrets with its allies. We think we know what the French nuclear strategy is — and it appears to be very tough — but we do not know for sure, important though that information would be to us.

The Pollard case is thus embarrassing but not especially surprising, and while he should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, the strategic relations — not to mention the moral and cultural relations — between the United States and Israel cannot be affected at all.